

**MULTIDISCIPLINARITY AND AFRICAN STUDIES :  
AT THE DAWN OF A RENEWED JOURNAL. SOME REFLECTIONS.**

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**SUMMARY**

The author presents some reflections on the two main points of discussion that were raised in the process of outlining an editorial policy for the new journal Afrika Focus: the problem of interdisciplinarity or multidisciplinary and the problem of the African research focus. The final choices, which he made together with his fellow editors seem to him so attractive that, in his view, the risk of editing the journal can be taken.

**KEYWORDS :** Afrika Focus, AVRUG-Bulletin, editorial policy, multidisciplinary, African research

Several years ago, I had the opportunity of joining a group of scientists at the university of Ghent who shared one particular interest: the study of Africa. They were historians, linguists, jurists, philosophers, anthropologists, political scientists, biologists, geographers, geologists, civil and agricultural engineers, to name but a few. The group's name is "Africa Association of the State University of Ghent" (Afrika-Vereniging van de Rijksuniversiteit Gent, abbreviated as: A.V.R.U.G.). From 1972 until 1983, they published a journal called the A.V.R.U.G.-bulletin.

Their noble intentions were clear: to promote interdisciplinary research on Africa, by offering a forum to young scholars for the collaboration on, the discussion and the synthesis of different approaches to the African reality.

The history of the group and the journal has been written elsewhere (AVRUG-bulletin, 1983, nr.4). To a large extent, the interdisciplinary approach has been successful. Many particular subjects were studied in depth, and special issues

followed each other. But growing up is not always as easy as it might seem. Adolescent crises even affect groups of scientists and journals. Criticism was not long in coming and internal dynamics made changes necessary.

Two main points of discussion should be mentioned here. First, the problem of interdisciplinarity; second, the problem of the African research focus.

The first problem refers to fundamental philosophical, methodological, and pragmatic questions.

The philosophical discussion can be defined as follows. Interdisciplinarity cannot mean a mere concatenation of disciplines: it should be a philosophical search for synthetic models for communication beyond the frontiers of each discipline. Of course, such models already exist. We could be reductionists or perspectivists, physicalists or general system theorists. But the problem is that these models are framed in a philosophical language that is almost too esoteric for non-philosophers. A potential synthetic model is, consequently, rejected on the same grounds that raised the problem of interdisciplinarity: the lack, and even the impossibility, of communication between the disciplines. Of course, the problem can be situated on a more critical and fundamental level.

Communication has been lost, since unity of knowledge has been lost. A kaleidoscope of particularistic paradigms, fields and subfields, methods and theories caused by the uncontrolled growth of science and scientific institutions has led to the fragmentation of communication and, consequently, to the alienation of scientists from their personal work, and from each other. Many members of the AVRUG group have experienced this alienation, and it became one of the main incentives to change the policies of the group in order to look for new ways of communication. So the group agreed on a renewed policy, which may be called a critical-realistic one. Since interdisciplinarity is too ambitious, a less pretentious approach was called for. Consequently, multidisciplinary communication could be considered the ultimate goal. In that case, collaboration between scientists could provide the empirical evidence that

communication is possible, if the following conditions are fulfilled: a willingness to solve the language problem and a readiness for reciprocal integration through the exchange of empirical data, methods, and theories. This implies, of course, that the closedness of the languages used in the disciplines and reciprocal prejudices will be neutralized and criticized. It implies also that every scholar will try to "translate" his esoteric knowledge in order to make it comprehensible for a broader audience of disciplines. Consequently, the group's working hypothesis can be summarized as follows: because the search for synthetic models seems to be too ambitious and too esoteric for non-philosophers, a multidisciplinary approach, based on the willingness to communicate and to use non-esoteric language, is the most realistic solution. It will indicate that communication beyond disciplines is possible, which is an empirical *conditio sine qua non* for genuine interdisciplinary communication and, consequently, for a constructive search for synthetic models. Of course, we are aware that our ultimate goal provides only a minimal solution to the interdisciplinary problem, being almost only a practical *modus vivendi*, but we are convinced that it will be constructive and creative.

This philosophical discussion had important methodological consequences. Since the journal was published as a series of monodisciplinary special issues, it reflected but partially the discussions within the AVRUG group. Besides, the idea that the presentation of thoroughgoing monodisciplinary data would be a sufficient condition for interdisciplinarity had not been the subject of systematic and generally accepted discussion. The result of this approach was, that, as a general rule, the journal was only read by individual scholars when it was the turn of their discipline. Consequently, the journal did not have a well-defined profile, since it presented itself now as a journal for biology, then again as a journal of demography, etc. Obviously, in this regard, the interdisciplinary goals of the AVRUG group had failed. This is the main reason why the editorial board decided to defend an open editorial policy by deciding to admit articles from several disciplines to be published in the same issue if they meet the criteria for multidisciplinary communicativeness.

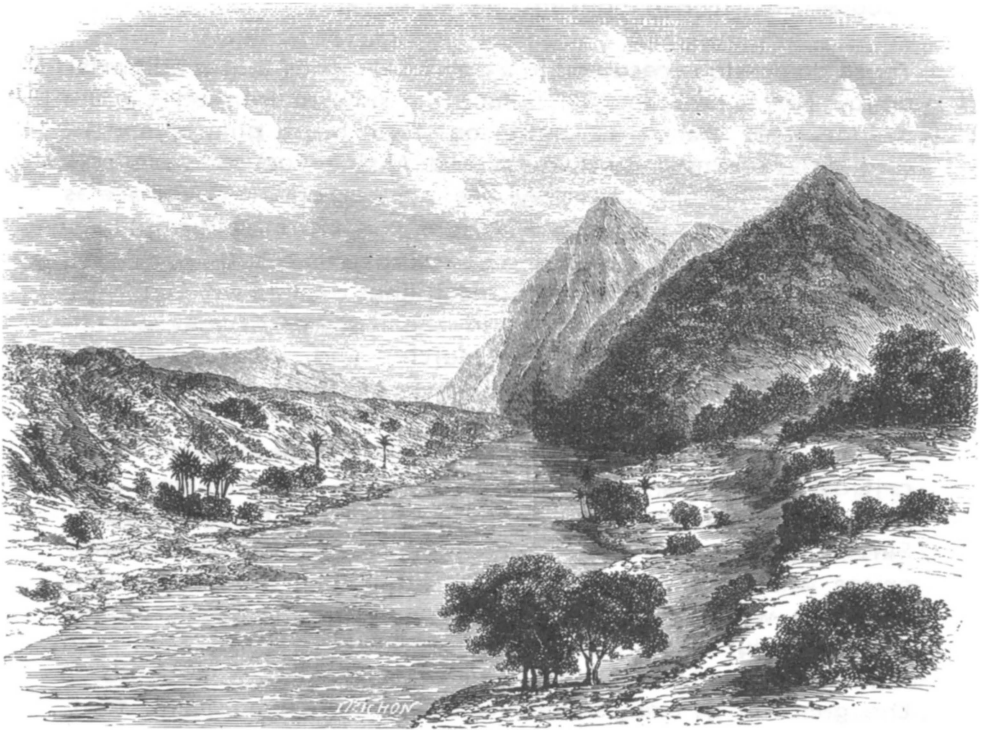
Of course, there are also some pragmatic reasons why a certain feeling of uneasiness exists among the AVRUG group. Our university, like any other university, is subdivided in faculties, sections, and departments, with many physical, psychological, and paradigmatical frontiers so difficult to cross. Attempts at reconciliation and cross-communication often face distrust and irony. Defenders of interdisciplinarity tend to receive uncommunicative answers, as though the interdisciplinary goal were not a serious one. The feeling of fighting against nothing and everybody, as Don Quixote did, is a rather disenchanting experience for young scholars who want to find a place in the Old House of Wisdom. But being ridiculed is better than defeatism. Therefore, the challenge exists to call on every scientist who has a particular interest in the study of Africa to join the AVRUG group and to use the journal for communication.

The second problem refers to a discussion between two main approaches to the study of Africa: the global approach and the fundamentalistic approach. The global approach stresses the non-isolation of Africa within the global situation, and it would argue that scientists should direct their research toward the interdependencies between Africa and the rest of the world, in order to attain a global and interdisciplinary perspective of the African reality. This approach is closely related to a much broader pedagogical objective of international education. The fundamentalistic approach does not deny the international and intercontinental dependencies, but its defenders hold the opinion that a global approach covers too extensive a field of research to be appropriate for interdisciplinary collaboration and experiment. Besides, this approach is still in its infancy. Consequently, the raw empirical material is too meagre and not sufficiently systematized to be useful for multidisciplinary communication. This situation forces us to choose an economical solution: since the African field itself remains a widely neglected area (see, for example, the historical research), and because there is still a tremendous amount of work to be done, it would be better to confine ourselves to Africa itself. Of course, both approaches are not necessarily exclusive. If it is empirically demonstrated that a wider

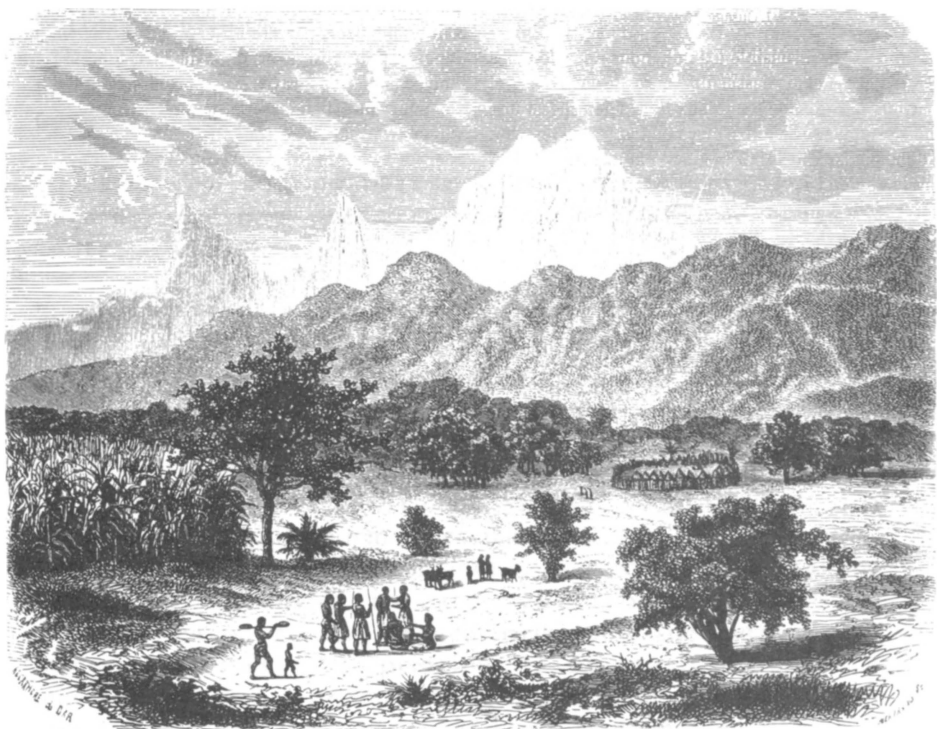
perspective is necessary and fruitful (e.g. Afro-American studies), no scientific objections against this broadening of the observational scope can be justified. Consequently, it was not so difficult to settle for a compromise and to decide that all contributions that are the result of Africa-focused research are potentially acceptable.

Those discussions resulted in a delimitation of a new editorial policy for a new journal, which is now presented to the reader. This policy is built on two main pillars: multi-disciplinary communicativeness and Africa-focused research. The basic principles, as they are printed on the cover are as follows: first, to provide a forum for the multidisciplinary study of Africa by accepting contributions based on original research from all scientific disciplines dealing with current trends and new developments in the study of Africa; second, to stimulate in this way the multi-, and interdisciplinary communication.

Of course, every process of giving birth to a brain-child is a critical one. Pre-natal and post-natal complications are almost unavoidable. Many dangers threaten the young baby. Since this journal is a brain-child, it seems that infancy crises will be its natural fate. Consequently, the first volume is only a weak and poorly differentiated prefiguration of what the journal can become in the future. Just as children depend on their parents to survive, Afrika Focus depends on the goodwill of many scientists and authors who think that the journal holds something for the future. Without this support, the journal will pass away very soon, and an interesting experiment will come to a premature end. Since this risk is real, one has to accept the challenging character of editing such a journal. But, since many scholars are looking for means of communication, we are not afraid. So let the journal open its pages to multidisciplinary communication in order to see in what kind of subjects we will find common agreement and reciprocal understanding.



Le Nil au-dessus du confluent de l'Asua. — Dessin de A. de Bar.



Vue des montagnes à l'ouest de Zungoméro, prise de Albuiga. — Dessin d'A. de Bar.

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